

Pentecost 7B 2009

Texts: 2 Samuel 7:1-14a

Psalm 89:20-37

Ephesians 2:11-22

Mark 6:30-33, 53-56

“that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross.”

Ephesians 2: 15-15

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart, be always acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer. Amen

Have you received a gift that you A. didn't know what it was and B. when you found out what it was, you really didn't want it? I had that experience about 20 years ago. We were spending Christmas at my in-laws in Connecticut and Christopher was only a baby. As everyone had to mail their presents to us anyway, they just mailed them to Connecticut instead of St. Louis.

One of the presents that arrived was this little blue box from Tiffany. Well, that got my attention real fast. But when I looked at the gift tag the present wasn't for me it was for Christopher. I just couldn't figure out why or what Christopher could be doing with a gift from Tiffany.

This blue box wasn't wrapped, it just had a lovely silver bow so I figured it would be easy to untie the bow and take a peek without anyone being the wiser. Now, I don't want to give you the wrong impression; I am NOT a present snooper. This is the only time I have done this...well, maybe there was one time before this incident, but that was it.

Anyway, on Christmas Eve, after everyone had gone to bed and were dreaming of sugar plums, I was wide awake trying to figure out what was in that box. I decided I just couldn't wait a few more hours because this was driving me crazy.

I put on my robe and very quietly tipped toed down the stairs to the lit Christmas tree. I sat on the floor and by the light of the tree and ornaments I untied the box, parted the white tissue paper and was looking at, well, I had absolutely NO idea what I was looking at. I had

never seen whatever it was before in my life! I held up this sterling silver thing, it kind of resembled a T and was about three inches high and about two inches across on the top.

I didn't know what this thing was, but I did know that I didn't want it. A charm I could understand. A silver baby cup with Christopher's initials engraved on it would have been lovely. A sterling silver necklace or bracelet for me would have been even lovelier.

I put the thing back in the blue box, covered it with tissue paper, tied the bow and went back to bed. The only problem was that I lay awake because I STILL didn't know what was in the box! I was a bit relieved that when I opened the box again, for the "first" time, no one else knew what it was either.

A few weeks later when the person who sent this thing to Christopher asked if I had gotten the blue box from Tiffany, I said "yes." And then I had to come clean and admit to her that I had no idea what it was or what its purpose might be. "It's a pusher!" she told me. "A pusher?" I replied. "Yes. It is for when the baby is learning how to feed itself and you use it to push together some food on the plate to get it on a fork." Ok, now I knew what it was for, but I still didn't want it. But, I was always taught to gratefully receive any gifts that were given. So I said thank-you and that was that.

In Paul's Letter to the Ephesians he writes to the Gentiles about the gift that they have been given in being grafted onto the tree of Israel. He reminds them that at one time they were without God, without Christ, without the covenant promise given to Israel.

The Ancient Near East was very much a place of separation, of people being in or out, accepted or rejected, clean or impure. The differences were immense; far greater and more divisive than anything we think we know.

Paul tells the Ephesians that Christ died to bring people together, not to push them apart, that because of Christ's dying, the wall of hostility between them had been broken down. God gave them the gift of reconciliation in Christ, in the cross. They were no longer strangers or aliens to God or to one another; they were no longer far away from God

because God chose to be with them. They were no longer two different peoples but one humanity.

Paul tells the Jewish and Gentile Christians that they are gifts to one another, that all the walls separating them, all the questioning, all the suspicion, all the fear, was no match for the reconciling power found in Jesus. He tells them that whether they like it or not, whether they understand the purpose or not, they are grafted onto the same tree. Both groups belonged to the blessing; they were to be a blessing to each other as well as a blessing to the world.

Paul tells them that whether they like it or not, whether they understand the purpose or not, they are in this together, and that it was being a part of one another in worshipping Christ that they would know the peace that Christ had already procured for them.

The peace was already there, they just had to open their hands to receive it. It wasn't that the peace between them had to be created, it was already created, already working. The peace offered in Jesus wasn't a peace they could make between themselves even if they desired it. It could only come from God. If they accepted the peace, no hostility could live among them. Hostility couldn't live because Christ was their foundation on which all other relationships were built.

Christ and relationship, hostility and peace have been very much on my mind this week. I groan every three years when our deliberative body, the General Convention of the Episcopal Church, meets, as they did for the last two weeks in Anaheim. I groan because I never know whether we will be brought together, or pushed farther apart. I groan because, at least to hear the media spin, there is usually more hostility than peace.

I can also tell you that the media, always, always, in their quest to get ratings and market share, get things wrong and blow out of proportion the disagreements that do occur and that are bound to occur given the deeply felt, deeply prayed about issues facing our church and our culture.

If I had to describe our American culture I would probably say that it is diverse and divisive, compassionate and controversial, individualistic

yet yearning for community, at war within and outside of itself yet craving peace. If I had to describe the Episcopal Church, I would use the same words, but then again, we are products of our culture, as were the Jews and Gentiles of first century Palestine.

Because we are products of our culture we cannot help but make decisions about the contexts in which our lives and faith occur. We are products of our experiences and understandings of the world.

Part of the problem for the Jews and Gentiles and part of the problem for us is that we bring to our faith different experiences and different understandings. And it is in discussing these different contexts and experiences that we tend to talk more than listen, where we tend to build walls that divide us rather than letting Christ break them down. It is in discussing our different ways of understanding God and each other that we tend to push away, rather than come together.

It hit me after reading Ephesians earlier this week that we humans have a pusher, a divine pusher, whose job it is to push together different people; people who at times wouldn't want to be on the same plate with each other, let alone the same fork.

One of the things that happen at General Convention is that every three years the church is pushed together, forced to look at itself in different ways and in different lights and forced to make difficult, difficult decisions.

Some of the decisions that are made, quite frankly, make me angry, if not downright crazy. Some of the decisions leave me scratching my head and wondering what planet the delegates and Bishops came from, and some of the decisions make me sad. And sometimes, yes, sometimes I think to myself, the kingdom of God has come near.

We face difficult and challenging times as Episcopalians. We struggle with issues of sexuality and with the place of gay and lesbian Christians in God's Church and what their place in ministry might be.

We struggle with declining membership and declining resources at the same time there is increasing need and increasing world poverty.

We struggle with the West's concentration on individualism and the East's concentration on bringing back a sense of community, of learning that we are a part of something much larger than ourselves and are accountable to more than just ourselves.

We struggle with doing the business of the church, which is a political process and taking the time, and yes it takes time, to enter into a deep theological process and discernment.

And too often, far too often, we concentrate on whether or not our position is right rather than whether the position and actions we take are faithful.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ is not about being right, it is about being faithful to the One that was so faithful to the will of the Father that he went to the cross.

The Gospel is not about what any of us think about any number of issues. In fact the Gospel isn't about us at all! It is about God wanting a relationship with us, wanting that relationship so much that he came to live with us and die for us.

The Gospel is about staying in relationship not just when it is easy, but especially when it is difficult. It is about holding each other closer when what we really want to do it push each other apart, because it is then that we need each other the most.

We have the choice to decide if we want hostility to be our foundation, or if we want Jesus Christ to be our foundation. We have the choice to build dividing walls or to know the peace that comes from letting God figure things out so that we might be brought together.

The silver pusher Christopher was given 20 years ago was in the shape of a T. The pusher we are given everyday is in the shape of the cross. That is what pushes us together, whether we like it or not, whether we understand it or not. And it is only the cross that can put to death the hostilities we hold and give us the peace we crave.

Amen.

